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ABSTRACT

Students in an educational policy class at Auburn University became involved in policy advocacy for Professional Development Schools in the State of Alabama as part of their course work. Through the course, students learned about theory and practice of educational policy, Professional Development Schools and their policy needs, and the importance of becoming proactive in policy advocacy on issues pertinent to improving teaching and learning in schools. This paper describes the processes used and offers insights from three students about what they have learned and what it means to them as education professionals. An appendix contains protocols for national and state interviews. (Author/DFR)

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Breaking Boundaries: Preparing Educational Leaders to be Policy Advocates

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Abstract

Students in an educational policy class at Auburn University became involved in policy advocacy for Professional Development Schools in the State of Alabama as part of their course work. Through the course, students learned about theory and practice of educational policy, about Professional Development Schools and their policy needs, and about the importance of becoming proactive in policy advocacy on issues pertaining to improving teaching and learning in our schools. This paper briefly describes the processes used and offers student insights about what they have learned and what it means to them as educational professionals.

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Introduction

Educational leaders must learn to be proactive rather than passive. Traditionally, school administrators have focused on management of their schools rather than leadership (Murphy, 1999). During the past two decades there has been an increased emphasis on transformational leadership (Burns, 1978), developing and communicating visions while fostering changes in the political and cultural systems of their organizations (Morgan, 1989). Societal and educational needs are rapidly being transformed due to cultural, social, economic, and technological changes and an increased emphasis on global perspectives. This widening of perspectives has necessitated a shift in the values and competencies of administrators toward those skills that emphasize the ability to not only manage, but to work collaboratively with diverse populations both within and outside school buildings (see NCATE, ISLIC, and Alabama Competencies).

Educational policy and policy making continues to be a passive process for most administrators. Mandates are handed down to schools to be implemented. Those who must implement these policies assume that they have little power to influence these policies, yet they know that they will be held accountable if the desired changes do not occur. We believe that this must change. Educators and educational leaders in particular must become more proactive, staking their claim as professionals.

In this paper we describe what happened in an educational policy class that encouraged a proactive approach. We begin the paper by describing the context of the class, offering an explanation of how this work is situated within the work of the West Alabama Learning Coalition, and by making comments about how the policy research

was conducted. We also offer insights from three students in the class about what this proactive approach means for them as future educational leaders. We end the paper with a brief discussion about future directions and implications of this type of work.

History and Background

Auburn's Educational Leadership Program

Auburn's educational leadership preparation program has recently been undergoing revisions (Kochan & Sabo, 1995; Kochan, Reed, Twale, & Jones, in press). Not only have we organized our program around various leadership competencies and standards (for example Alabama leadership competencies, National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards, and Interstate School Licensure Standards (ISLIC)), we have also incorporated an emphasis on systems thinking (Senge, 1990), creating learning communities (Kochan, et. al. 1998), and professional judgement-in-action (Reed & Ross, 1998). Professional judgement-in-action implies that, as professionals, we have a responsibility to inform others about educationally sound practices as well as to stake our claim to our rights and responsibilities to make decisions about areas within our educational domains. Examples of these areas include assessment, use of technology for teaching, and informed selection of appropriate teaching and learning practices.

Auburn University has been a leader in the support and development of professional development school (PDS) networks in our state. One of these professional development school networks is the West Alabama Learning Coalition. This coalition was initiated in 1996 as an attempt to connect public schools, institutions of higher education, social service agencies, and the business community in local partnerships

throughout the region for the enhancement of education in grades P-20. The purposes of the partnerships within the coalition include the following: a) to improve the quality of teaching and teacher education programs; b) to provide continuing professional development for all; c) to provide opportunities for exemplary education for all students at the P-12 and college/university levels; d) to provide opportunities for developing collaborative learning communities; and e) to conduct research and inquiry about teaching and learning. The West Alabama Learning Coalition, coordinated through the Truman Pierce Institute in the College of Education at Auburn University, has been partially funded by the Jesse Ball duPont Foundation. Auburn University was an original member of the Holmes Group (1990) [now called the Holmes Partnership]. Our Dean in the College of Education, Richard Kunkel, was the former Executive Director of the Holmes Partnership. Last October he was invited to be part of a National Governors' Association committee focusing on PDS issues. Our coalition also met that day, and we used this as an opportunity for a telephone conference between members of this National Governors' Association committee and members of the West Alabama Learning Coalition about policy needs for PDS. After this telephone conference, members of the West Alabama Learning Coalition developed a set of principles and policy options that could be submitted to the Governors' Association.

Policy Work within an Educational Leadership Class

One goal of our educational leadership preparation program is to engage our students in the real work of education. As a result of our coalition activities, we wanted to focus the work of the Spring 1999 policy class on the policy needs of professional development schools. Not only did students in this class learn about the history of and

theories about educational policy practices, but they also learned about professional development schools. Course readings focused on understanding policy from both practical and theoretical frames, as well as reading about the history of and issues about professional development schools. Our educational leadership program operates under a Community of Learners philosophy, suggesting that students and professors create meaning together as they focus on issues of subject, self, and society (Henderson & Hawthorne, 1999). We emphasize that leaders have a responsibility to inquiry, social activism, and operating in the best interest of students. Additionally, there is an emphasis on collegial and proactive behavior and service to others.

It was important, therefore, that class learning integrate theory into practice in an authentic manner while accomplishing the above stated goals. First, we considered the policy needs of our coalition members that were generated at the October 1998 meeting where we participated in the telephone conference described earlier in this paper. Based on these identified needs and combined with ideas developed after reading research about professional development schools, we decided to interview "experts" from around the country. As part of their learning experience, students developed interview protocols (see Appendix A) and conducted e-mail interviews with PDS stakeholders at the national and state levels which were focused on better understanding the policy concerns and needs of these stakeholders.

The experts were selected to represent a variety of voices present in the national PDS movement. Our national experts included deans, college professors, public school personnel, union officials, and others who are actively involved in the Holmes Partnership. At the state level, we interviewed select members of the West Alabama

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Learning Coalition. Again, these members were selected to insure a diverse range of voices within our coalition. While students waited for interview responses, we focused class discussions on additional readings about PDS work, examined PDS policies in other states, and considered who our audience would be and how best to prepare the policy briefing once data analysis was complete. Once all interview data were received, they were analyzed using a constant comparative approach (Patton, 1990) to identify trends in the data, and a policy briefing was developed based on these findings.

Conducting the Policy Briefing

Students in the class developed a Power Point briefing and prepared information packets for our invited guests. The policy event was framed as an opportunity to "celebrate leadership," learn about professional development school policy needs, and offer feedback to doctoral students on the policy briefing. Our invited guests included three state legislators, one member of the state board of education, and many members of the West Alabama Learning Coalition. It was important that coalition members were present to offer feedback and engage in dialogue about the policy briefing because we had developed this briefing as a service to coalition members. Our dean, Richard Kunkel, provided funding for the meeting and helped to facilitate the event, both in terms of calling legislators personally, introducing the instructor and students to the group, and explaining the purposes for the event. Additionally, he actively participated in the open discussions about PDS policy needs that followed the policy briefing. Following the presentation, we invited feedback on the briefing from the legislators and school board member, as well as from the coalition members in attendance. This provided an opportunity for members of the coalition to react to and share their thoughts about policy

needs with the legislators. Additionally, students received valuable feedback about their briefing and we all gained insights into the issues of concern for the legislators.

Student Insights about Policy Advocacy

In this next section of the paper, three students from this policy class share their views and insights on policy advocacy and its relevance for them. All three emphasize a sense of empowerment and optimism that is fostered when taking a proactive stance. Additionally, all of the students speak to the importance of engaging in authentic learning opportunities that integrate theory and practice.

Service to Others While Learning

As a student in the Leadership program, I believe it is imperative to receive hands-on experience in policy development. Too often educators have missed opportunities to influence public opinion and to educate stakeholders on important policy matters. Heightened public awareness of educational issues and the increasing tendency of legislative bodies to mandate educational policy make it essential that educators share their expertise with the widest possible audience. We cannot sit back and allow policy to be created by people who do not understand the implications of their actions. Our profession is to teach, and we must get to the business of teaching those who would dictate what happens in our schools.

Recently the Georgia legislature mandated that Professional Development Schools be organized by every institution in the state that has a teacher education program. The universities were given one year to form partnerships with schools or school districts. Of course, this mandate goes against everything we know about the dynamics of forming PDS relationships. Regrettably, educational leaders in the state did

not provide guidance for the legislature on this issue, and an unfortunate situation has been the result.

Let me provide another recent example. The *Atlanta Constitution's* November 7, 1999, issue covered the weekly results of how Georgia's Congressional delegation voted November 1 - 5. I was interested to note that the House of Representatives approved 224 - 193 a bill urging schools to teach reading by the phonics method, not the less structured "whole language" approach. Of the 11 Georgia representatives, 7 voted yes to the proposal, 2 voted no, and 2 did not vote. None of these people has been an educator, yet most of them felt qualified to vote on an important issue of pedagogy. Where were the International Reading Association (IRA), the National Council on Teaching English (NCTE), National Education Association (NEA), and Phi Delta Kappa while this issue was being debated on the floor of the House? Why didn't the experts who have a stake in the reading curriculum provide information to Georgia's Congress that would have clarified the issue for legislators? Leadership in education must not be limited to the classroom or school building.

A classmate once described teachers as suffering from the "battered wives" syndrome. She explained that as a profession, we educators tend to sit back meekly as others make decisions for us. We accept criticism from the parents, the media, and legislative bodies and we do little to explain ourselves. We take on more responsibilities as governing agencies pass mandates and issue policy directives that are not always educationally sound. Instead of mounting a challenge, we simply say, "We'll try harder. We'll do better." Unless we are willing to continue to be mere observers in the process of

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educational policy making, educators must become active advocates for the policies that will benefit the children we teach and vocal opponents of bad policy.

Like any skill, policy making must be practiced. As a professional in higher education, I found the real-life experience of helping to develop a policy agenda much more instructive than a purely theoretical approach. The opportunity to discuss Professional Development Schools with national experts who have participated in the development of these partnerships was an invaluable experience. It put me at the center of things rather than at the periphery and made me understand that policy doesn't happen; it is planned. As an educator, I want to have a voice in the planning of policy that affects my profession and me.

There is a huge difference between reading *about* policy development and helping to influence policy. This course has made us aware of our responsibilities as educators to help all stakeholders understand the myriad of consequences that result from policy decisions. Our development of the policy initiative for Professional Development Schools for Alabama legislators had a two-fold benefit. It allowed us to experience policy development in an authentic way, and it provided a very real service to Alabama's policy makers.

Empowering Ourselves

From the standpoint of a veteran high school teacher and a prospective school administrator, I recognize the importance of those practicing in education to be proactive in helping state and national policy makers develop effective policy. Today, I can say with reliability that public educators and administrators do not engage in the act of developing policy initiatives in education; however, it may be in this political arena in

designing policy where educators can make the grandest mark on the future of education. We educators have not worked at influencing policy for several reasons: (1) we are too busy with the daily demands of our work, (2) in public education, we have rejected the opportunity of being involved in legislative process except through state and national educational associations, which we have permitted, through our inaction, to do our thinking for us, and (3) we are not trained, so we do not understand how to be initiators of state and national policy.

At Auburn University, members of the doctoral program were involved in the fundamental steps of policy making. Dr. Cindy Reed's Educational Policy class fulfilled a need in my desire for leadership development that had not been addressed through other learning opportunities. I participated with other class members in an active process of conducting current research on Professional Development Schools. We discussed how we wanted to define a professional development school (for the purposes of proposed policy) and what we thought were the most important underlying assumptions of a PDS. We listened to the advice of experts about how we should focus on activities in practice and future possibilities. We bantered about our reflections on how PDSs blend with current policy needs. We collaborated in our multi-faceted roles of learners, researchers, and professionals. Educational leaders in the field shared insights into what is being done in many Professional Development Schools and the best ways for us to present what can be done through policy making procedures. I learned effective methods of actively engaging community stakeholders and state members, not as policy makers only, but as partners, in positive educational change initiatives. It is in this arena of engagement that educators can help legislators and community leaders to become advocates for new

policy initiatives. The students in the class worked as an effective community of learners, bringing together, into a common arena, people representing the stakeholders in this initiative. We invited principals, educators, legislators, and other community leaders; and, with a common goal in mind, we shared the best and most current information we had amassed on professional development schools and the importance of expanding collaborative learning environments.

No one thing drives education more than state policy. State policy mandates what educators will do, or not do, where funding will go, and which programs will thrive. Educators and students work together in the same environment and policy decisions affect us all. What affects teachers affects students, and what affects students affects learning and local climate. It is most important that educators take a proactive role in effecting change in education. Becoming involved in the process of influencing policy will help educators strip away their feelings of isolation and ineffectiveness. The traditional educator's role has been altered many times by policy, and this role will continue a metamorphosis with future mandates. As educators, we have an ethical responsibility for raising our voices for effective educational reform.

I have always told my students that voicing a complaint is never as good as voicing a change. In this class, I practiced what I had always taught. I am a true member of a vibrant community of learners, and I like feeling empowered and being proactive in policy issues.

A View From Within

I am presently, and was at the time of our policy briefing, a graduate student working in the Truman Pierce Institute. As mentioned earlier, the Truman Pierce Institute

facilitates the activities of the West Alabama Learning Coalition, a network of Professional Development Schools in Alabama. Among my duties as a graduate research assistant, I was responsible for assisting in the coordination of West Alabama Learning Coalition meetings, communications, reports, and evaluation. Because of these experiences, I was very knowledgeable of our university and college of education commitment to the development of Professional Development Schools and served as a resource for information throughout this policy advocacy enterprise.

The presentation of the policy briefing was definitely the high point of the course work, not because our grade depended on it, but because this was our opportunity to share with stakeholders and decision-makers the "fruits of our labor." From this process, we gained valuable knowledge about researching, developing, and presenting policy recommendations. We framed our briefing as an opportunity to receive feedback for stakeholders and decision-makers regarding the overall quality and utility of the presentation. We were very selective in the text used in the presentation because we wanted our audience to leave with accurate images of the possibilities and the responsibilities in the development of Professional Development Schools.

As an aspiring educational leader, the implications are quite clear. Policy development is not the sole responsibility of those who make the laws. The voices of the citizenry, and in this case, educators, must also play a role in how policy is developed and for what purposes. This activity has reshaped my view about the responsibility of educational leadership in its broadest context. Simply stated, the role of the educational leader must extend beyond the doors of the schoolhouse and into the doors of the

statehouse. This must be the case if we envision an educational system that values all children.

For me, the entire process was very empowering. To play even a small part in a policy discussion was more than I had ever considered. When I was a classroom teacher, I always viewed policy development and decision making as the responsibility of others. I never considered how one might participate in the policy development process. In public education, I feel the reactive stances of schools and school systems and the structures they promote forces a climate where knowledge about sound educational practices and pedagogy is viewed as coming from others. As educational leaders we must be active participants in the policy development process.

Future Directions

Although the class is over and students will no longer be involved in future policy related initiatives on Professional Development Schools in our state (unless they choose to be), there are plans to continue the efforts begun by this class. In early December 1999, the West Alabama Learning Coalition will meet and the policy briefing will be presented to all coalition members attending. After that, we will make modifications, then provide copies of the briefing and information packet to all coalition members for their use at special meetings with community groups, school boards, superintendents, and deans/department heads of colleges/universities. Following that, we will begin statewide meetings with legislators in areas of our state with active PDSs to help educate them about the possibilities of simultaneous renewal for public schools and teacher education.

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It is our belief that through these efforts begun in an educational policy class, we have raised the level of awareness on the part of influential legislators about professional development schools and have planted the seed for future policy activity in this area.

Implications

This experience has changed our perceptions about our roles as professors and students. Authentic action, feelings of empowerment, acceptance of responsibility for policymaking: these are the products of a course that provides students with the opportunity to advocate for educational policy. If we believe that one purpose of education is to transform the learner, then we must seek ways to get our students actively involved in the real issues that affect our profession.

After our involvement in this class, we feel even more strongly that it is the responsibility of educational leaders to be proactive in ensuring that politicians have the information that they need to create policies that support teaching and learning in meaningful ways. Rather than viewing each other as adversaries, we must learn to break down the artificial boundaries that prohibit opportunities for information and idea sharing. The legislators and school board member attending the policy briefing were genuinely interested in the information that we had to share with them. It is through partnerships such as this, that we can begin to stake our claim to our knowledge about teaching and learning practices that promote student success, and working together with legislators and others, create policies that support positive educational practices.

As schools have become decentralized, it only makes sense that policy making, too, should reflect that trend. As our world becomes increasingly complex, it becomes even more essential that spaces be created for many and diverse voices at the policy

advocacy tables. It is our hope that through the experiences that we have had in this class that we will continue to be proactive in policy advocacy and that others, too, will join in this effort.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocols

Protocol for National Interviews

1. What do you see as the most powerful policy agendas/trends for PDSs at the national level?
2. What states have adopted policies supportive of/relevant to PDSs?
3. What do you see as the greatest benefits emerging from your PDS work?
4. What advice do you have for us as we develop our PDS policy briefing for key stakeholders?
5. What else can you tell us that would be helpful?

Protocol for State Interviews

1. What has your PDS experience meant to you personally/for your school?
2. What have been the greatest benefits?
3. In what ways has your PDS fostered increased opportunities for others and/or improved the quality of education?
4. What do you think are the most important PDS policy concerns that key stakeholders in our state should hear about?
5. What advice would you give us as we develop our policy briefing on PDSs?
6. What else can you tell us that might be helpful?